

BELGIUM

Funerary Heritage in Belgium, from Underestimation to Revaluation to Degradation

Most Belgian cemeteries were created in the 19th century and testify in a particular way to the bourgeois culture which started to flourish at that time, like everywhere else in Europe. With the individual tombs, surviving relatives paid tribute to their deceased



Evere cemetery, Brussels, dismantled tomb
(photo: Linda Van Santvoort)

family members and no expense was spared to do so through a high-quality artistic individual expression. Cemeteries developed into a unique 'lieu de mémoire' (memorial site) where societal, social and ideological developments were materialised. The First World War claimed millions of casualties. This caused a break in trend in how people dealt with death and how the deceased were remembered by their relatives. For the first time in history a democratisation process was deliberately pursued. On the military burial grounds no distinction was made by rank or position

and the principle was applied that in death all men are equal and deserve equal respect. Still, it is precisely this social shift in the 20th century that caused the funerary culture to disappear. In the post-war welfare state death was no longer used to remember the deceased for eternity. Tombs became standardised consumption products with a limited expiry date. In our current dealings with death, tombs with artistic qualities have become rare. Anonymous burials in green areas and virtual types of commemoration are gaining increasing popularity and support. All of this means that our cemeteries should more and more be designated as "herit-



Evere cemetery, Brussels, tombs in conflict with nature
photo: Linda Van Santvoort)

age". Within this context (policy area) we should reflect on how we should deal with this in the future.

'Outlawed' tombs

In 1971, the Belgian Act 'on cemeteries and undertaking' led to an important shift that reflected a societal development. The combination of lack of space, lack of interest in the old tombs and a



Willebroek cemetery, the consequences of the removal policy (photo: Linda Van Santvoort)

changing funerary culture resulted in the repeal of the perpetual concession, which had been introduced by Napoleon in 1804. As a result, the majority of the tombs became ‘outlawed’ in one fell swoop. Tombs which were already older than fifty years and for which the owners (relatives) did not insist on a renewal became the property of the municipality which could proceed to their removal. This law caused considerable anxiety among those who were committed to immovable heritage. The application of this law has started to define the image of our cemeteries. Cemeteries no longer constitute a coherent entity and their image is disrupted by a removal policy which makes a selection on an administrative rather than on a qualitative and heritage basis.

Meanwhile, the fear of insufficient space on the cemeteries, which was the reason for the 1971 Act, is totally irrelevant today. With 48% cremations (in 2010) Belgium is certainly not at the top of the ranking in Europe, where the UK is the front-runner with 70%. Still, the number of cremations is definitely rising. Consequently, pressure on the cemeteries has evolved in a totally different way. Removed tombs leave empty spaces that are no longer filled. This seriously disrupts the layout of the 19th century cemeteries which had either a landscape or an urban character, depending on the circumstances. To fill this randomly freed up space in a qualitative way is far from straightforward.

Unknown is unloved

The immovable heritage care sector is convinced that mapping out heritage, or in other words inventorying it, is indispensable for its preservation and for a good policy and management. For architectural heritage, a systematic inventorying process was started in the early 1970s. Within the regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital) this inventorying process is still taken to heart. In fact, insofar as this process is area-based (Flanders and Wallonia), a re-inventorying project has meanwhile also started, because the used values and criteria are constantly changing. However, funerary heritage completely falls outside this scope. None of the three regions have so far done any work on a systematic inventory of cemeteries and graveyards up to the level of the tomb. Yet, from an art historical perspective more than ordinary interest is shown in funerary heritage. However, the research that has been carried out up to now by various universities in the framework of (master’s) theses and which has also included inventories of cemeteries has not been opened up yet. The shift towards a coordinating inventorying process is still a distant prospect. The initiative which Flanders took in 2004 to encourage local administrations (municipalities) through a Flemish Parliament Act to draw up lists of tombs of ‘local historical significance’ is only slowly getting into its stride and is lacking



Dieweg cemetery in Ukkel, damaged tomb (photo: Linda Van Santvoort)

the required coordinating dimension. Moreover, there is still too much uncertainty about its actual purpose. As a matter of fact, this initiative even intensifies the distinction between heritage of local and supralocal significance, whereas the legislation on the protection of monuments and landscapes does not make this distinction in Flanders. This leads to a discrepancy and an a priori hierarchical distinction which seems to assume that funerary heritage is a local responsibility and does therefore not exceed local significance. A thematic approach – like inventorying cast-iron grave crosses in Wallonia or recording children’s graves in Flanders – also has its merit, but becomes bogged down in a casuistic approach with highly differing starting points. Consequently, the results cannot really be used in a policy context. For the moment there is no overview whatsoever. Therefore, a system to process and open up data in a centralised manner is urgently required. This can only be efficiently organised by a government in consultation with all the actors (local administrations, associations).

Revaluation or memento mori?

As is often the case, awareness of the significance of heritage results from indignation. In response to the above mentioned Act of 1971, for instance, the foundations were laid for the valorisation and revaluation of cemeteries and their tombs. This revaluation was generated from the bottom up. Associations such as Epitaaf vzw started to dedicate themselves to funerary heritage and tried to publicise its value to the largest possible public.

Meanwhile, on an international level, the Association of Significant Cemeteries in Europe (ASCE) raises public awareness each year during the Week of Discovering European Cemeteries. Cemeteries are regarded more and more as an attraction and cemetery tourism has become an established activity. This attention is positive, since it increases support. However, the question is whether it actually contributes to a better preservation.

Precisely, funerary heritage seems to be in an ambiguous position. Cemeteries invite people to reflect on their mortality. Cemeteries do not attract the average tourist. Those in search of added value gaze in admiration at the beauty of decay. The restored tombs, which indeed often stand out in their surroundings, are from that point of view perceived as a ‘nuisance’. The fact is that some degree of erosion is simply inherent in cemeteries and even fosters their quality. The cemetery of Ukkel Dieweg already stood out from its protection in 1997 due to the large presence of biodiversity. Meanwhile, nature has gained the upper hand and many tombs are entirely overgrown or even destroyed. In this case the balance between monument and nature seems to be totally missing and the ‘soft’ approach that was intended seems to have completely lost its purpose.

Protection and/or management

We have gone a long way already as far as the protection of cemeteries and individual tombs is concerned. It is difficult to deduce any figures, because since the regionalisation of heritage policy in Belgium in 1989 very diverse legal instruments are in place

in each of the regions which are used totally differently. Since 1938, graveyards were protected as landscapes. The protection of a graveyard usually resulted from its protection by the church. 1976 marked a change in the Belgian context. One year after the International Monuments Year 1975 the legal framework was adjusted and the concept of monument was widely extended. From then on, even very modest heritage (architectura minor) could be protected. This was a development that was expected to be beneficial to the funerary heritage. Since that time graveyards were often protected as 'townscapes'. The protection of cemeteries as 'monuments' is still rather exceptional; at least when not taking into consideration the military cemeteries, since an intensive protection campaign has been launched in the build-up to the Great War Centenary Commemoration in 2014. Exceptions that prove the rule are the protection of a cemetery like Schoonselhof (Antwerp) in 2008, or – even before that – the protection of the oldest part of the cemetery of Laken (Brussels) in 1999 or of the cemetery in Walloon Spa in 2004. Sometimes, individual monuments are protected as well. The question raised in this respect is whether these protections actually serve the intended purpose, which is to better preserve them. Any answer to this question should be put into the right context. Bruges succeeded in finalising a set of instruments for a better preservation, even without the protection of the central cemetery (Assebroeck). For the first time, an end was made to the removal through the sale of old concessions with the preservation and re-use of the tomb. Today, this system is applied to many cemeteries. The protected monuments in the graveyard of Laken do not serve as an example of good preservation and management. The tomb of La Malibran which contains a masterpiece by the sculptor Geefs has continued to decay despite its protection in 1999. These are merely examples that show that investing in preservation and good management is a question of developing good tools and making choices, and that an unimaginative application of a legal protection unfortunately does not always guarantee the intended result.

Cemeteries and tombs fall victim to vandalism and theft

There are more and more reports in the press and media about vandalism (deliberate destruction, either targeted or not) and also about theft. It is with good reason that any violation of the respect for the dead causes great public indignation. In the case of theft a distinction is to be made between metal theft and art theft. Both have disastrous consequences for the funerary heritage. However, it is especially the latter form which leaves heritage care institutions in two minds. The efforts that were made to demonstrate

the significance and artistic value of tombs seems to be used as a 'manual'. It is reported, for instance, that precisely the most interesting and valuable artistic sculptures (often bronze) are stolen. This has led to the debate whether or not cemeteries should be open to the public at all times (since theft and vandalism often occur at night). It is practically impossible to fully secure cemeteries, which are sometimes very extensive in size.

Maintenance against erosion and decay

Within the heritage care sector there is a consensus about the fact that the best guarantee of preservation lies in proper and proactive maintenance. However, the time when relatives carried out this maintenance on a permanent basis is behind us. As a result of 'granting heritage status' to cemeteries, this responsibility now lies with the government.

Permanent monitoring is the key to a proactive policy. In Flanders, Monumentenwacht (Monument Watch Flanders) plays an important role in this. The expertise built up by Monumentenwacht Vlaanderen resulted in 2012 in a publication entitled "Maintenance of Funerary Heritage". This publication discusses all aspects relating to the maintenance of cemeteries. The complexity which is so typical of funerary heritage is touched upon as well.

Conclusion

Due to the richness and diversification, and in particular the vulnerability of funerary heritage, the heritage preservation sector is faced with great challenges. There is an urgent need for a coordinating and systematic inventorying process. Only on this basis can an integrated policy be designed which is founded on justified choices. The Belgian regions have the necessary instruments at their disposal to protect the most valuable cemeteries and tombs. In addition, instruments can be developed to also take initiatives at the local level to promote the preservation (maintenance) of funerary heritage. Communication around good practices could provide a stimulus and help local administrations to look for solutions. Associations may play a role in raising awareness of the value and significance of this heritage among the public at large.

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